

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY

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AMCONSUL PESHAWAR UNN

C O N F I D E N T I A L LAHORE 1206

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PK

SUBJECT: LAHORE BY-ELECTION TAKES ENIGMATIC TURN BUT

PPP STILL LIKELY PREVAIL

REF: LAHORE 1203, 1198

1. SUMMARY: CRUCIAL BY-ELECTION CAMPAIGN FOR PUNJAB ASSEMBLY SEAT FROM LAHORE CONTINUED GENERALLY IN PPP'S FAVOR INTO ITS LAST WEEK, THEN TOOK APPARENT TURN IN DIRECTION OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATE KHAR IN BACKLASH FROM HEAVY-HANDED POLICE SUPPRESSION OF IMPORTANT KHAR PUBLIC MEETING OCTOBER 15. CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OF MANY OBSERVERS OF VARIOUS STRIPES, BACKED BY SOME GRASSROOTS EVIDENCE, INDICATES THAT KHAR NOW MIGHT WELL BE ABLE TO UPSET PPP OPPONENT BHATTI IN FREE AND FAIR ELECTION. HOWEVER, PREVAILING OPINION ALSO CONTINUES CYNICALLY TO HOLD THAT AUTHORITIES CAN AND WILL ENGINEER BALLOTBOX VICTORY FOR PPP ON OCTOBER 19, WHICH WE STILL REGARD AS MOST LIKELY OUTCOME. END SUMMARY.

2. LAHORE-VI BY-ELECTION CAMPAIGN PERSISTED ALONG LINES REPORTED IN OUR 1186 ("PPP JUGGERNAUT OUT TO CRUSH KHAR") FOR FIRST THREE DAYS THIS WEEK, THEN WAS THROWN INTO CONFUSION AFTER HEAVY-HANDED POLICE DISRUPTION OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATE KHAR'S IMPRESSIVE PUBLIC RALLY OCTOBER 15 (LAHORE 1198, 1203),
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CULMINATING IN SUSPENSION OF PUBLIC ELECTIONEERING UNTIL

OCTOBER 19 POLLING. GALAXY OF PPP SPOKESMEN CONTINUED TO BLANKET CONSTITUENCY, ADDRESSING PUBLIC MEETINGS AND GATHERINGS OF PPP WORKERS WITH HEAVY PUBLICITY AND APPARENT SUCCESS.

3. CAMPAIGNERS FOR FIGUREHEAD PPP CANDIDATE BHATTI WERE LED BY CENTRAL EDUCATION MINISTER PRIZADA, LENDING CREDENCE TO REPORTS THAT BHUTTO HAD SUPERIMPOSED HIM OVER PARTY GEN SECY MUBASHIR HASSAN TO DIRECT THE CAMPAIGN. PIRZADA SPEAR-HEADED PUBLIC ATTACK IN SO-CALLED "SECOND ROUND AGAINST REACTIONARY FORCES" (FIRST ROUND HAVING BEEN 1970 GENERAL ELECTIONS). PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER QURESHI FINALLY WEIGHED IN OCTOBER 14 WITH PUBLIC ADDRESS DECRYING KHAR'S "PAROCHIALISM" AND EXTOLLING GOVERNMENT'S "FAIR DEAL TO LABOR" (IN HEAVILY LABORITE CONSTITUENCY).

4. MISSING NO BETS, PPP SENT DISTAFF TEAM TO WIN WOMEN VOTERS, COURTED SUPPORT OF SMALL CHRISTIAN MINORITY, AND USED AZAD KASHMIR CHIEF MINISTER HAMID TO SOLICIT VOTERS OF KASHMIRI ORIGIN. PARTY ALSO PULLED OUT ANOTHER RED HERRING BY ACCUSING KHAR OF ENJOYING FULL FINANCIAL AND OTHER SUPPORT OF AHMADIYA COMMUNITY BENT ON CANCELLING PRESENT CONSTITUTION AND RECLAIMING THEIR RIGHTS AS MUSLIMS. AT MID-WEEK PPP ALSO TROTTED OUT CHIEF MINISTERS QADIR OF BALUCHISTAN AND NASRULLAH OF NWFP TO COUNTERACT KHAR'S ADVOCACY OF PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY.

5. PPP RECEIVED SUBSTANTIAL BOOST OCTOBER 12 WHEN PAK FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS CHIEF BASHIR BAKHTIYAR ANNOUNCED FEDERATION'S SUPPORT FOR CANDIDATE BHATTI, SIGNIFICANT ASSIST IN WORKINGMAN'S DISTRICT. KHAR'S FORTUNES WERE ALSO SET BACK BY ANNOUNCEMENT OCTOBER 14 THAT CENTRAL ACTION COMMITTEE OF UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT HAD DECIDED, OVER STRONG OPPOSITION BY SOME ELEMENTS, TO CONTINUE BOYCOTT OF BY-ELECTIONS.

6. IMPORTANT TURN WAS ANNOUNCEMENT BY EX-CHIEF MINISTER (NOW SENATOR) RAMAY AT PRESS CONFERENCE OCTOBER 15 THAT HE WAS QUITTING PPP, WITH HEAVY HEART, AND SUPPORTING KHAR IN BY-ELECTION. IN LENGTHY, EMOTIONAL STATEMENT KHAR REITERATED DEMANDS HE HAD MADE TO BHUTTO SEPTEMBER 30 FOR REFORMING PPP, DEPLORED "BLACKOUT" OF HIS EARLIER PRESS CONFERENCE
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AND COLD SHOULDER HE HAD RECEIVED FROM BHUTTO AND PARTY HIERARCHY (LAHORE 1147). HE ACCUSED LATTER OF MOUNTING "CHARACTER ASSASSINATION" CAMPAIGN AGAINST HIM, AND PLEADED FOR FREE AND FAIR BY-ELECTION AND RESTORATION OF HONEST "POLITICAL PROCESS" IN COUNTRY. FOUR MPAS, INCLUDING FORMER PUNJAB MINISTERS KHAKWANI AND MALHI, JOINED RAMAY IN BOLTING PPP, AND A FEW OTHERS EXPECTED FOLLOW SUIT.

7. TIGHT GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF MEDIA CONTINUED TO BE MANIFESTED IN BLATANTLY ONE-SIDED PRO-PPP COVERAGE OF ELECTION NEWS WITH KHAR GIVEN ALMOST NO NOTICE EXCEPT WITH NEGATIVE INNUENDO. INTERESTINGLY, RAMAY PRESS CONFERENCE WAS REPORTED IN FULL ONLY BY PRO-JAMA'AT-I-ISLAMI URDU JOURNAL WAFAQ, EVIDENTLY IN EFFORT TO EMBARRASS BHUTTO AND PPP, WHILE NAWA-I-WAQT PLAYED IT DOWN AND OTHER PAPERS IGNORED IT. (CONSERVATIVE NAWA-I-WAQT HAS LITTLE USE FOR RAMAY'S SOCIALISTIC LINE.)

8. ENTIRE SITUATION, HOWEVER, CHANGED WITH POLICE DISRUPTION OF KHAR'S TAJPURA RALLY OCTOBER 15 (LAHORE 1203) AND CONSEQUENT BAN ON FURTHER ELECTIONEERING. CONSTITUENCY, UNDER STRONG POLICE AND FAF SECURITY MEASURES, LIKELY TO REMAIN QUIESCENT UNTIL OCTOBER 19 VOTING. BUT TURN OF EVENTS HAS CAST ENIGMATIC CLOUD OVER BY-ELECTION, PROMPTING WIDESPREAD SPECULATION OVER PSYCHOLOGICAL GAIN FOR KHAR AND CORRESPONDING LOSS FOR PPP. MOST OF OUR CONTACTS OPINE THAT KHAR WAS MAKING INROADS WITH SIMPLISTIC ATTACKS ON THE ESTABLISHMENT AND WITH INTRIGUING THREAT OF MAKING SENSATIONAL REVELATIONS (PRESUMABLY INTENDING TO EXPOSE BHUTTO'S "HIDDEN HAND" IN ALIENATION OF EAST PAKISTAN AND, POSSIBLY, COMPROMISE OF NATIONAL INTERESTS AT TASHKENT IN 1965). MANY PROFESS TO BELIEVE THAT WITH BACKLASH OF PUBLIC SYMPATHY FROM TAJPURA INCIDENT, KHAR NOW MIGHT WELL BE ABLE TO DEFEAT COLORLESS PPP CANDIDATE BHATTI IN FREE AND OPEN ELECTION.

9. BRITISH EMBOFF BUDD, WITH WHOM WE COMPARED NOTES OCTOBER 17, DREW SIMILAR CONCLUSIONS FROM TWO DAYS OF INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND NON-PPP POLITICAL CONTACTS HERE. LOCAL EMPLOYEES RESIDENT IN CONSTITUENCY REPORT DISCERNABLE BACKLASH AGAINST ADMINISTRATION THERE. IN ONE MICRO-INSIGHT, CONFIDENTIAL

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LAHORE PUBLISHER TELLS US ALL FIVE OF HIS PRESSMEN LIVING IN LAHORE-VI HAVE REVEALED INTENTION TO VOTE FOR KHAR.

10. KEY FACTOR, THEREFORE, APPEARS TO BE EXTENT TO WHICH AUTHORITIES ARE WILLING AND ABLE TO MANIPULATE VOTING. MOST OBSERVERS CYNICALLY EXPECT GOVERNMENT TO SPARE NO EFFORT IN DOING SO, POINTING PARTICULARLY TO NATURAL EFFECT OF STRONG SECURITY MEASURES IN INHIBITING VOTER TURNOUT AND FACILITATING IMPERSONATION, BALLOTBOX TAMPERING AND OTHER ELECTION ABUSES FAMILIAR HERE. REALISTICALLY, WE ARE COMPELLED TO ACCEPT LATTER AS MORE LIKELY OUTCOME THAN FREE BALLOTTING -- CONSIDERING IMPORTANCE WHICH GOVERNMENT CLEARLY ATTACHES TO WINNING THIS BY-ELECTION -- INSURING DEFEAT OF OPPONENTIST KHAR BY PPP'S BHATTI.
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